

TESTIMONY OF KRISTEN MCDONALD
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ON H.R. 3954

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE

APRIL 10, 2002

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 3954, the Caribbean National Forest Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. My name is Kristen McDonald, and I am the Associate Director of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Program for American Rivers. American Rivers is a national river conservation organization with over 30,000 members. Since its founding in 1973, American Rivers has worked with our grassroots partners to protect rivers under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and has actively assisted federal agencies, states and local groups with river conservation efforts.

I would like to thank Resident Commissioner Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá for introducing H.R. 3954, which would designate three outstanding rivers in the Caribbean National Forest in Puerto Rico as components of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. These rivers would not only be the first wild and scenic rivers designated in Puerto Rico, they would be the first tropical rivers in the System as a whole. One of the goals

of Congress in passing the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968 was to create a system of rivers that were representative of the nation's diversity of rivers, and by designating the Rio Mameyes, Rio Icacas, and Rio de la Mina, this Congress would make a significant mark in the history of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The Rio Mameyes is the only free-flowing river that remains in Puerto Rico. The portion found eligible and suitable for designation is entirely within the National Forest boundary, from its headwaters in the Baño de Oro Research National Area to the Forest Boundary. This remote area is known for its beautiful waterfalls, and hiking trails and swimming holes make it a popular recreational destination. The Rio Mameyes has unique stands of buttress-rooted trees that are uncommon not only in Puerto Rico but throughout the Caribbean. In addition, the river provides important habitat for the endangered Puerto Rican Parrot, Puerto Rican Boa, and Broad-winged and Sharp-shinned Hawks.

The Rio Icacas is remarkable for its variety of terrain, unusual geology, and numerous endangered and sensitive tropical plant species. The upper part of the river has sandy-bottomed pools and is sinuous and lower in gradient than the other rivers in the Forest. It is known to provide habitat for the sensitive Burrow coquí, a rare tree frog that only occurs in the cloudforest area of the National Forest.

The picnic areas in the headwaters of the Rio de la Mina are the most popular tourist destinations within the Caribbean National Forest; in addition La Mina Falls is a spectacular scenic attraction and a popular hiking destination. The river was likely named after a mid-1800s Spanish gold mining complex, the remains of which are within the scenic corridor; the old mine shaft and some of the homestead sites can still be enjoyed by hikers along the La Mina Trail. The Puerto Rican parrot, Puerto Rican Boa, and two endangered plant species are known to occur along the Rio de la Mina.

All three of these rivers are important to the survival of the endangered Puerto Rican Parrot. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates there are only about 100 known Puerto Rican Parrots left today, and the 40 of

these that live in the wild all live in the Caribbean National Forest. It is the last protected area where these birds have a chance at recovery. Protecting these three river corridors would help ensure desired tree habitat for the parrot is left intact.

The three rivers are eligible and suitable for designation, and the Forest Service has demonstrated there is substantial local support for their designation. American Rivers supports passing H.R. 3954 but we do have three concerns with the bill as currently drafted and we are working with the Regional Commissioner's staff to address these issues.

First, section 2(c) dealing with establishment of boundaries should be corrected to be consistent with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which states that boundaries must be established within one year of designation, not "as soon as practicable," as currently required in the bill. This is an important correction, as boundary establishment will determine the area that the Forest Service must protect and enhance as a wild and scenic river, which must average $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from the ordinary high water mark on each side of the river.

Our second concern involves section 2(d), "Special Management Considerations." While American Rivers agrees that the research activities within the Caribbean National Forest are vital to the American people, installation and maintenance of such facilities, if they occur within designated wild and scenic rivers, must be consistent with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. In particular, we would suggest amending the bill to require the Forest Service to ensure that any such facilities do not harm the free flow or values for which the rivers have been designated.

Finally, the bill should include an authorization of appropriations as necessary for the Forest Service to protect and enhance the Rio Mameyes, Rio de la Mina, and Rio Icacas Wild and Scenic Rivers.

In conclusion I would like to point out that the Caribbean National Forest is the source of drinking water for

20% of Puerto Rico's population. There are already a dozen dams in the National Forest that divert water for public use. By designating the headwater areas of the Rio Mameyes and Rio Icacas as wild and scenic rivers, Congress will ensure that these existing water uses can be maintained and that future pressure to build more dams in the area is balanced with the need to protect valuable tropical habitat, valuable scientific research sites, and recreational resources.

I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony to the Subcommittee today.